Witness Statement

Hearing on "The Past, Present, and Future of NASA"

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Science, Space and Technology

Rayburn House Office Building
Room 2318

Lt. Gen. Thomas P. Stafford, USAF (Ret.)

16 February 2017

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of the Committee: I am honored to appear before you today to discuss our nation's space program. In my opinion, the timing and subject of this hearing are perfectly chosen. One of the key issues confronting the new Congress and the new Administration will be how to go about restoring American preeminence in space after what have been, frankly, eight years of lost opportunities. And, after getting the program back on track, the next task than will be to ensure its stability. We have in recent years seen all too clearly the consequences of failure to carry out long term objectives. The changing of major programs with the change of new Administrations has been detrimental to the Nations space program.

NASA's past is one of this nation's crown jewels, one of the things that truly made America great. That past encompasses nine Apollo missions to the Moon and six manned landings, seven robotic spacecraft landings on Mars, the Hubble Space Telescope, the first rendezvous with and landing upon a near-Earth asteroid, the robotic reconnaissance of every planet in the Solar System, the development of the Space Shuttle and, with our international partners, the building of the International Space Station. I and my colleagues on this panel had the incredible privilege, and good fortune, to be a part of this history.

Unfortunately, it *is* history. NASA's present does not do justice to that past. Too many of our greatest achievements are no longer to be seen in flight, but rather are to be found only in museums. We have abandoned plans to return to the Moon and establish a lunar base, and instead talk – but only talk – about going one day to Mars. The next flagship science mission we launch, the James Webb Space Telescope, was initiated in the Bush Administration, with nothing comparable initiated during the eight years of the Obama Administration. Yes, we are building a heavy-lift launch vehicle, the SLS, that is comparable in performance to the Saturn V upon which Jack Schmitt and I have flown to the Moon. But in contrast to the Saturn V, which flew five times during an eleven-month period in 1968-69, we are planning to fly the SLS only once in every few years. We certainly need the SLS, but equally we need a space program designed to make good use of it.

We need a better future than this for NASA, and for the nation, in space. We need to return to the Moon and eventually go on for an expedition to Mars. The SLS can also be useful for large robotic spacecraft to the outer planets and may be useful to the Department of Defense.

The Trump Administration has been very busy in its first weeks in office, but despite this we have already seen some re-focusing on the Moon as the stepping stone to moving humanity into deep space. This is a welcome view. While the loss of preeminence in space was only one of the many ways in which the prior administration weakened American leadership in the world, it was one of the most profoundly noticeable, given the near-universal appeal of space exploration to the advanced nations of the world — otherwise known as "our competitors". People everywhere want to be allied with leaders, and nothing that the United States has ever done bespeaks "leadership" more than being first and foremost on the space frontier. It benefits us in every way – geopolitics, trade, deal making, national security – in everything we do in the world.

The future of NASA and our nation in space depend upon setting a bold, immediate, a practical goal, a goal which will once again put the United States in first place on the world stage. That goal is the Moon. For a multitude of national security, economic, and scientific reasons, we cannot cede the space between Earth and Moon, nor the lunar surface itself, to China or other countries. However, International partnerships can certainly be developed once the objectives have been defined and authorized. When we do return to the Moon, we should structure the program to offer the best possible forward path to Mars, but the Moon must come first. That is not the course upon which we are presently embarked, and so it must change. This Congress, and this Administration, can be the ones to change it. Just like the Congress, in a great bipartisan effort, created the SLS and Orion programs.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.